

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

AMCONSUL HONG KONG

USLO PEKING

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 3 KATHMANDU 1012

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS, PFOR, NP, US, CH, IN

SUBJECT: BIRENDRA'S FIRST TWO YEARS

1. SUMMARY: AFTER TWO YEARS ON THRONE, KING BIRENDRA REMAINS DOMINANT FORCE IN POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC LIFE OF NEPAL. ALTHOUGH ISOLATED IN MANY WAYS FROM PEOPLE AND BUREAUCRACY, BIRENDRA CONTINUES TO PROJECT IMAGE OF FORCEFUL, YOUNG MONARCH COMMITTED TO DEVELOPMENT. HOWEVER, EARLY EXPECTATIONS OF RAPID ECONOMIC PROGRESS HAVE NOT BEEN REALIZED, AND KING IS INCREASINGLY BLAMED FOR FAILURE TO ARREST DETERIORATING ECONOMIC SITUATION EVEN THOUGH MUCH OF THIS FAILURE CAN BE ATTRIBUTED TO EXTERNAL FACTORS. SINCE KING IS KEY TO STABILITY IN NEPAL, IT REMAINS U.S. INTEREST TO CONTINUE OUR MODEST BUT STEADY SUPPORT FOR BIRENDRA'S REGIME IN ORDER TO STRENGTHEN PROSPECTS FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND EVOLUTIONARY SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE. BIRENDRA'S POLICY OF FLEXIBLE BALANCE BETWEEN CHINA AND INDIA ALSO CONTRIBUTES TO STABILITY IN REGION AND MERITS OUR ENCOURAGEMENT.

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END SUMMARY.

2. STYLE: AFTER TWO YEARS ON THE THRONE, NEPAL'S YOUNG KING BIRENDRA CONTINUES TO PROJECT AN IMAGE OF A DEDICATED, ACTIVE ADMINISTRATOR. HE HAS SYSTEMATICALLY SOUGHT TO PROMOTE HIS OBJECTIVES OF MODERNIZATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN WHAT REMAINS IN MANY WAYS A BACKWARD AND FEUDAL SOCIETY. ACHIEVEMENT, HOWEVER, HAS FALLEN SHORT OF RHETORIC. BUREAUCRATS, INTELLIGENTSIA AND URBAN ELITES HAVE BEGUN TO WEARY OF CONSTANT EXHORTATION FROM THE PALACE IN FACE OF SHORTAGES, INFLATION AND OVERALL STAGNATION OF ECONOMY. TWO YEARS AGO THESE SAME GROUPS, UNREALISTICALLY TAKING THE KING'S STATEMENTS AT FACE VALUE, HOPED FOR RAPID AND DRAMATIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS FROM BIRENDRA'S REIGN. WHILE SYSTEMATIC CREATION OF DEVELOPMENT INFRASTRUCTURE HAS GONE ON AND TOURISM HAS PROSPERED, OVERALL THE ECONOMY HAS STAGNATED. BIRENDRA HAS RETAINED AROUND HIM THE SAME RELATIVELY INEXPERIENCED GROUP OF PALACE ADVISORS WITH WHICH HE BEGAN, THOUGH THERE ARE REPORTS THAT HE MAY BRING INTO POSITIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY SUCH WESTERN-EDUCATED ECONOMISTS AS FORMER FINANCE SECRETARY BEKH THAPA AND FORMER CEDA DIRECTOR PASHUPATI RANA. HE CONTINUES TO REIGN IN THE ALOOF AND UNAPPROACHABLE STYLE WHICH HAS CHARACTERIZED RANA AND ROYAL RULE IN MODERN TIMES, BUT HAS DEVELOPED LITTLE PERSONAL CHARISMA BEYOND THAT WHICH HE INHERITED. INDEED, BIRENDRA SEEMS MORE ISOLATED FROM HIS CIVIL SERVANTS AND THE BROAD MASS OF HIS PEOPLE THAN HIS FATHER, AND THIS ISOLATION IS A SOURCE OF GROWING CONCERN TO NEPALESE DECISION-MAKERS. HE HAS INTRODUCED FEW NEW CONCEPTS SINCE HIS FIRST YEAR; AND WITH THE EXCEPTION OF THE NEW EDUCATION PLAN, THE INNOVATIONS FOR WHICH HE WAS INITIALLY PRAISED ARE BECOMING INCREASINGLY STALE.

3. ACHIEVEMENTS: ON POSITIVE SIDE OF THE LEDGER, BIRENDRA HAS COMPORTED HIMSELF WITH MODEL RECTITUDE. CRITICISM OF HIS PERSONAL BEHAVIOR IS RARE, THOUGH THE EXTRAVAGANCE OF THE ROYAL FAMILY'S STYLE OF LIVING IS SOMETIMES COMMENTED ON ADVERSELY. HE HAS CONTINUED INTENSIVE AND ARDUOUS INTERNAL DEVELOPMENT TOURS BY WHICH HE HAS HOPED TO STIMULATE AN INTEREST IN DEVELOPMENT PROBLEMS AND FROM WHICH HE SEEMS TO GAIN CONSIDERABLE DOMESTIC CREDIT. HIS STATURE HAS ALSO BEEN ENHANCED BY HIS STATE VISITS TO INDIA AND THE PRC AND HIS PARTICIPATION AT ALGIERS NON-ALIGNED CONFIDENTIAL

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CONFERENCE WHICH RESULTED IN NEPAL'S SELECTION FOR MEMBERSHIP ON NON-ALIGNED COORDINATING COMMITTEE.

4. IN POLITICAL TERMS BIRENDRA HAS MOVED IN COURSE OF HIS SECOND YEAR TO RID HIMSELF OF A CONTROVERSIAL PRIME MINISTER WHO HAD BECOME SUBJECT OF INCREASING CRITICISM AND TARGET FOR CHARGES OF CORRUPTION. BIRENDRA'S MOST OUTSTANDING ACCOMPLISHMENT HAS BEEN TO REDUCE THE LEVEL OF OVERT POLITICAL DISCONTENT WHICH,

SHORTLY AFTER OUTSET OF HIS REIGN, SEEMED TO THREATEN THE TRANQUILITY OF THE COUNTRY IF NOT THE THRONE ITSELF. THIS ACHIEVEMENT REFLECTS HIS SUCCESS IN FOCUSING PUBLIC ATTENTION ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROBLEMS AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE ARBITRARY, THOUGH LEGAL, INCARCERATIONS OF THOSE WHO HAVE OPPOSED HIM.

5. THE POWER STRUCTURE IN NEPAL HAS PERCEPTIBLY SHIFTED OVER THE LAST TWO YEARS AS BIRENDRA HAS MOVED TO CONSOLIDATE DECISION-MAKING IN THE PALACE: IT CAN NOW BE SAID THAT "BIRENDRA IS NEPAL." POLITICIANS REMAIN POWERLESS AND INEFFECTIVE; THE CIVIL SERVICE IS INCREASINGLY REMOVED FROM THE SEAT OF POWER, AND THE PALACE SECRETARIAT IS NOW THE CENTER FOR ALL MAJOR DECISIONS. BARRING ASSASSINATION, INCAPACITATION OR A SERIOUS AND DRAMATIC DECLINE IN THE COUNTRY'S ECONOMIC FORTUNES, BIRENDRA SHOULD REMAIN UNCHALLENGED FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE.

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6. IN DOMESTIC POLICY TERMS, BIRENDRA'S SUCCESSES HAVE BEEN RELATIVELY FEW. A NOTABLE SUCCESS, HOWEVER, IS THE NEW EDUCATION SYSTEM PLAN WHICH BEGAN TO BE IMPLEMENTED THIS YEAR. IT HAS BEEN

ACCEPTED WITHOUT EITHER THE DISLOCATIONS OR THE STUDENT UPEHAVALS WHICH ITS CRITICS PREDICTED. WHILE THERE WILL STILL BE MAJOR PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH FUNDING AND STAFFING, IT HAS PUT NEPAL'S EDUCATION SYSTEM ON A NEW VOCATIONALLY-ORIENTED BASIS WHICH SHOULD HAVE A PROFOUND IMPACT ON FUTURE GENERATIONS OF NEPALESE. IN TERMS OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT THE KING HAS SUCCESSFULLY CONTINUED TO ATTRACT RESOURCES FOR DEVELOPMENT INFRASTRUCTURE AND TOURISM. FURTHER PROGRESS, HOWEVER, WILL DEPEND ON NEPAL'S ABILITY TO ATTRACT ADDITIONAL INVESTMENT IN TOURISM, MINERAL EXPLORATION AND WATER RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT. ON ALL OF THESE POINTS THE KING HAS TAKEN A POSITIVE ATTITUDE.

7. INADEQUACIES: BECAUSE BIRENDRA HAS CONSCIOUSLY ASSUMED RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE TOTALITY OF THE COUNTRY'S FORTUNES, THE SUCCESS OR FAILURE OF DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS WILL BE ATTRIBUTED
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TO HIM EVEN THOUGH, IN FACT, THE DECISIVE CONSTRAINTS ON ECONOMIC GROWTH--GEOGRAPHY, PAUCITY OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND AN INESCAPABLE DEPENDENCE ON THE INDIAN ECONOMY--ARE BEYOND HIS CONTROL. NEPAL'S ECONOMIC GROWTH RATE FOR 1973 LAGGED BEHIND POPULATION INCREASE AND PROSPECTS FOR THE COMING YEAR AT LEAST ARE SIMILARLY DISCOURAGING. HOPEFULLY, THE SUBSTANTIAL VOLUME OF EXTERNAL ASSISTANCE WHICH NEPAL RECEIVES (APPROXIMATELY \$40 MILLION ANNUALLY) WILL COMPENSATE IN PART. WHILE THE FACTS AND STATISTICS ON NEPAL'S GROWTH ARE NOT WIDELY KNOWN, EVEN THE MOST HUMBLE CITIZEN IS CONSCIOUS OF ECONOMIC STRAINS IMPOSED BY BURGEONING INFLATION AND SHORTAGES OF ESSENTIAL COMMODITIES AND CONSUMABLES. INDEED, INFLATION MERITED UNUSUALLY CRITICAL AND EXTENSIVE DEBATE IN JUST-CONCLUDED SESSION OF THE NATIONAL PANCHAYAT; AND THE KING MAY SEEK TO DEFLECT CRITICISM FROM HIMSELF BY MAKING HIS FOREIGN MINISTER, WHO ALSO SERVES AS FINANCE MINISTER, A SCAPEGOAT FOR THE NATION'S RECENT ECONOMIC ILLS.

8. THE KING'S EFFORTS TO REFORM AND MOTIVATE HIS CORRUPT AND HIDEBOUND BUREAUCRACY HAVE BORNE LITTLE TANGIBLE FRUIT. HIS ANTI-CORRUPTION EFFORTS, WHILE CONTINUING, HAVE IN SOME CASES HAD THE COUNTER PRODUCTIVE EFFECT OF INHIBITING COMPETENT AND IMAGINATIVE GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS. EARLY EFFORTS TO SUPPRESS CORRUPT PRACTICES WITHIN THE ROYAL FAMILY HAVE APPARENTLY NOT BEEN PURSUED.

9. IN SUM, OVER LAST TWO YEARS WHILE HE HAS CREATED AN IMPRESSION OF INTENSE ACTIVITY, IMPLEMENTATION OF DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS HAS NOT ALWAYS BEEN ADEQUATE AND MOMENTUM OF DEVELOPMENT HAS SLOWED. IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN WHETHER THE RUMORED APPOINTMENT OF A DEVELOPMENT ADVISOR IN THE PALACE WILL REMEDY THIS DEFECT. THE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING COUNCIL, ONE OF BIRENDRA'S INITIAL INNOVATIONS, HAS PROVED UNWIELDLY AND INEFFECTIVE; AND THE MUCH-HERALDED REJUVENATION OF THE "BACK TO VILLAGE

NATIONAL CAMPAIGN" IS REGARDED BY JADED PANCHAS AND CIVIL SERVANTS WHO MUST PARTICIPATE WITH LITTLE ENTHUSIASM AND A CERTAIN WRY HUMOR.

10. WITH REGARD TO INTERNAL POLITICS, THERE IS AN ATMOSPHERE OF COMPLACENCY AND STAGNATION. OFT-RUMORED REFORMS IN THE PANCHAYAT SYSTEM HAVE NOT TAKEN PLACE, AND THE PYRAMID OF PANCHAYAT INSTITUTIONS REMAINS WITHOUT REAL POLITICAL OR ECONOMIC POWER.
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AS SUCH IT IS A SOURCE OF LATENT DISSATISFACTION, PARTICULARLY AMONG THE URBAN INTELLIGENTSIA WHO CRAVE A SHARE OF POLITICAL POWER. MODIFICATION IN THE PANCHAYAT SYSTEM MAY YET TAKE PLACE, HOWEVER, AND THE KING, IN A RECENT INTERVIEW WITH AN INDIAN JOURNALIST, HINTED AT A MORE ACTIVE ROLE FOR THE MINISTERS IN HIS GOVERNMENT. IF THAT HAPPENS, THE RELATIVELY CLOSED GOVERNMENTAL PROCESSES MAY BE LOOSENEED, LEADING ULTIMATELY TO A FURTHER EVOLUTION IN THE STRUCTURE OF THE PANCHAYAT SYSTEM.

11. THE OPPOSITION: OPPOSITION TO BIRENDRA BOTH WITHIN AND WITHOUT THE PARTYLESS PANCHAYAT SYSTEM REMAINS WEAK AND DIVIDED AND SHOWS FEW SIGNS OF INCREASING STRENGTH. THOSE WHO SEEK TO WORK FOR REFORM FROM WITHIN NOW RARELY SPEAK OUT PUBLICLY, WHICH MAY INDICATE THAT BIRENDRA HAS BEEN SUCCESSFUL IN COWING THEM THROUGH HARSH MEASURES TAKEN AGAINST SOME OF THEIR COHORTS. SEMI-CLANDESTINE OPPOSITION IS ALSO INEFFECTUAL. ACCORDING TO VARIOUS ACCOUNTS, INDIAN-BASED NEPAL CONGRESS PARTY (NCP), THE MOST VIABLE OPPOSITION GROUP, HAS NOT ONLY LOST TACIT GOI SUPPORT BUT IS BEING ACTIVELY SUPPRESSED BY IT. DESPITE ITS LEADERSHIP'S RESIDUAL POPULARITY IN NEPAL, NCP POSES NO GENUINE THREAT TO THE REGIME, ESPECIALLY AS LONG AS IT IS DENIED EXTENSIVE EXTERNAL ASSISTANCE. SIMILARLY, THERE HAS BEEN NO RESURGENCE IN THE FORTUNES OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF NEPAL WHICH REMAINS FACTIONALIZED AND ENJOYS ONLY LIMITED INTERNAL OR EXTERNAL SUPPORT. THERE ARE NO INDICATIONS OF DISCONTENT WITHIN THE RANKS OF THE ARMY AND/OR THE POLICE, WHICH ARE THE ONLY DOMESTIC ENTITIES CAPABLE OF CHALLENGING THE THRONE.

12. FOREIGN RELATIONS: THE PAST YEAR HAS BEEN ONE OF SUCCESS FOR BIRENDRA. HE HAS CONTINUED THE CAREFUL POLICY OF FLEXIBLE BALANCE BETWEEN CONTENDING NEIGHBORS. CHINA AND INDIA HAVE REMAINED THE FOCUS OF NEPAL'S FOREIGN POLICY, AND THE KING'S TWO STATE VISITS HAVE REINFORCED NEPAL'S RELATIONS WITH ITS GIANT NEIGHBORS. IN PARTICULAR HE HAS BEEN SUCCESSFUL IN CREATING WHAT HE HAS DESCRIBED AS A "MATURE AND SOBER" BASIS FOR NEPAL'S RELATIONSHIP WITH INDIA. FEARS GENERATED BY 1971 SOUTH ASIAN CRISIS HAVE SOMEWHAT ABATED AND SUSPICION OF INDIA, THOUGH REAL, IS DIMINISHED. GOI'S DECISION TO CONTAIN THE NCP HAS CONTRIBUTED SIGNIFICANTLY TO IMPROVEMENT IN RELATIONS. THIS FAVORABLE TREND, HOWEVER, HAS NOT BEEN TO THE DETRIMENT OF RELATIONS WITH THE PRC

WHICH THE KING RECENTLY SAID HAD "NEVER BEEN BETTER."

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13. BEYOND RELATIONS WITH ITS IMMEDIATE NEIGHBORS, NEPAL'S FOREIGN POLICY HAS LONG BEEN ONE OF MAXIMIZING CONTACTS WITH A WIDE SPECTRUM OF EXTERNAL POWERS. BIRENDRA HAS CONTINUED TO WORK TOWARDS THIS GOAL WITH NOTABLE SUCCESS. NEPAL NOW RECEIVES DEVELOPMENT AID FROM MORE SOURCES THAN ANY OTHER RLDC. IN ADDITION IT HAS SUCCESSFULLY MANAGED TO MAINTAIN GOOD RELATIONS WITH BOTH ISRAEL AND THE ARABS, AS IS EVIDENT FROM ITS HAVING BEEN CHOSEN FOR UNEF. FINALLY, ITS ASSIDUOUS EFFORTS TO WOO THIRD WORLD HAS LED TO NEPAL'S INCLUSION ON COORDINATING COMMITTEE OF NON-ALIGNED GROUP.

14. THE SINGLE NEGATIVE ELEMENT IN BIRENDRA'S FOREIGN POLICY IS INCREASING TILT TOWARD VIEWS OF RADICAL NON-ALIGNED COUNTRIES. THIS TILT HAS BEEN EVIDENCED IN GON'S SUPPORT FOR SIHANOUK'S CLAIMS IN CAMBODIA AND MOST RECENTLY IN ITS RECOGNITION OF GUINEA-BISSAU. ON FREQUENT OCCASIONS GON OFFICIALS HAVE MADE CLEAR TO US THAT HIS MAJESTY DOES NOT WISH NEPAL TO BE ISOLATED FROM MAINSTREAM OF NON-ALIGNED THINKING AND THIS, CONFIDENTIAL

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AT LEAST SINCE THE 1973 ALGIERS CONFERENCE, HAS MEANT SOMEWHAT MORE RADICAL STANCE ON VARIOUS COLONIAL AND MIDDLE EASTERN ISSUES.

15. U.S. INTERESTS: WHILE BIRENDRA'S PERFORMANCE AFTER TWO YEARS CAN BE FAULTED ON VARIOUS SCORES, WE HAVE NO REASON TO SUPPOSE THAT HIS REGIME IS THREATENED. INTERNAL DISCONTENT IS AT MANAGEABLE LEVELS, AND EXTERNAL THREATS HAVE BEEN REDUCED OVER THE TWO YEARS OF HIS REIGN. THUS, BIRENDRA WILL, IN ALL PROBABILITY, REMAIN FOR SOME TIME THE PRINCIPAL LOCUS OF POWER IN NEPAL WITH WHICH WE WILL HAVE TO DEAL. OUR LONGER-TERM INTERESTS IN STABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN NEPAL AND IN THE REGION THUS DICTATE MAINTENANCE OF A CONSTRUCTIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE KING AND HIS GOVERNMENT. OUR EXISTING PROGRAMS ARE BASICALLY ADEQUATE TO THIS TASK.

16. WE HAVE NO PARTICULAR STAKE, HOWEVER, IN ANY PARTICULAR SET OF INSTITUTIONS IN NEPAL. INDIRECT AND POLITICALLY-CIRCUMSCRIBED PANCHAYAT SYSTEM IS LINKED WITH AUTHORITARIAN POSITION OF KING AND FREQUENTLY SUBJECT TO CRITICISM. POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC PRESSURES MAY WELL OVER TIME COMPEL BIRENDRA TO MODIFY PANCHAYAT SYSTEM. WE SHOULD, THEREFORE, AVOID INVOLVEMENT IN PUBLIC DEFENSE AND SUPPORT OF THIS PARTICULAR POLITICAL STRUCTURE. HAPPILY, NOW THAT OUR ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE EFFORTS ARE NO LONGER DIRECTLY INVOLVED IN PANCHAYAT PROGRAMS, THERE IS NO NEED FOR US TO DEFEND IT.

17. ON EXTERNAL POLICY FRONT, BIRENDRA'S SHREWD AND SKILLFULLY IMPLEMENTED POLICY OF BALANCE BETWEEN INDIA AND CHINA IS FULLY CONSISTENT WITH OUR INTEREST IN REGIONAL STABILITY AND MERITS OUR UNDERSTANDING AND, AS APPROPRIATE, OUR SUPPORT. WE SHOULD CONTINUE TO ENCOURAGE NEPALESE TO TAKE A BALANCED POSITION ON MIDDLE EAST QUESTIONS. FINALLY, TENDENCY OF GON TO EMBRACE SOME OF THE MORE EXTREME POSITIONS OF THE NON-ALIGNED GROUP WILL, WE SUSPECT, CONTINUE AND WILL MERIT EXPRESSION OF OUR CONCERN WHERE THEY ADVERSELY AFFECT OUR INTERESTS.

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